Insights into Horizon 2020 research impact

Climate Futures briefing paper

The overall success rate of eligible full proposals under the first 100 Horizon 2020 (H2020) calls was only 14% (compared with 20% for the whole of FP7)[1]. Many months of applicant time are spent submitting rejected proposals. Research impact is a major distinguishing factor in a winning proposal. We undertook this survey to find out what makes a proposal improve its competitiveness and stand out.

Condenser

- **Partners** invest at least a month, on average, in forming a consortium and submitting a proposal for highly competitive Horizon 2020 funding. Most are disappointed by a negative outcome;
- Evaluators are looking for very specific elements in a proposal to score ***impact*** highly, which is often the key to success;
- Common **weaknesses** include not addressing the impact statement adequately, delivering innovations to market, and results exploitation;
- Successful proposals give detailed yet realistic **pathways to impact**, backed up with credible targets and indicators;
- They involve **stakeholders** in concept design and consider their research needs carefully, along with interactive communication channels;
- **SME** partners are often included for their niche expertise but may have different constraints to researchers.

How and who

The perspectives of both H2020 evaluators and applicants were sought through online surveys, which were advertised through networks and word of mouth. 15 evaluators and 16 applicants responded. Although self-selecting, and not a large enough sample to be statistically representative, these responses were sufficient to build up a good understanding of views. Qualitative comments and quantitative

[1] *European Commission (2015). Horizon 2020, First Results*

answers were often clustered around common themes, and yielded a rich and complex picture.

Responding evaluators had assessed between 3–150 H2020 proposals, an average of 32 each. Responding applicants had been involved in between 1-50 proposals – with an average of 17 as non-coordinating partners, and 3 as coordinating partners. Time spent on proposal development ranged from 1-40 days for non-coordinating partners, average 20 days; and 25-300 days for coordinators, average 64 days.

Key findings

All evaluator respondents cited 'development of innovations and delivering them to market', and most (80%) cited interpretation of 'the expected impacts listed in the work programme' as common proposal weaknesses:

"The best evaluations had credible business cases"
"IPR issues not addressed sufficiently"
"guaranteed uptake by a commercial or public sector organisation (is desirable)"
"The excellence criterion is usually good but understanding of impact is often poor"

A clear route to impact is also essential:

"in order to increase impact more specific actions for involving key policy/decision makers would have been desirable."
"The proposal outlines very well the expected impacts listed in the work programme by focusing on the EU strategy on adaptation to climate change"

The early involvement of target groups in proposal development was also welcomed:

"A wide range of relevant stakeholders is active in the project from the start"

A realistic approach also scored positively:

"The identification of barriers and obstacles towards achieving the expected impacts evidences a high level of knowledge"

In contrast, poor planning and detail were scored negatively by evaluators:

"the overall planned exploitation is very limited and lacks credibility"
"the proposal does not present market analysis and business scenarios"

Half of evaluators considered the effective exploitation and dissemination of project results as a common weakness in proposals. Wide dissemination via networks, and interactive communication to non-scientific audiences via events and social media

were considered by over 60% of evaluators to be either 'important' or 'very important':

"video in conjunction with mass media / scientific journalism"
"EU-wide, as opposed to national"

A mix of methods was welcomed for exploitation, as were metrics:

"The dissemination strategy is coherent and ambitious, bringing together well tried as well as innovative approaches"
"The objectives of the dissemination and communication plans are enumerated, target groups identified and message strategy focused"

Over 70% of evaluators considered that SMEs were important for improving commercialisation potential, applied product research and results exploitation. Nearly 80% of respondents had collaborated with SMEs at least 'occasionally' to bring novel ideas, expertise and technologies. However, some resisted involving an SME to 'tick a box', citing as barriers to partnership their limited experience of working with academia, and lack of resources to invest in proposals.

The reasons for a poor impact evaluation were summed up by one applicant:

"In many cases the impact section is the last to be written, as scientists naturally prefer to focus on the science. This may be the reason why many projects appear to be shoehorned to fit the call, rather than first considering the expected impacts and working backwards to devise an appropriate scientific methodology".

What next?

We are freely circulating this briefing paper – please share it. A detailed report will be distributed to survey respondents. Based on these findings, here are our essential steps to a competitive proposal:

- ***Impact statement***: break this down into a series of discrete sentences or phrases;
- ***Objectives***: address each of these desired impacts and consider how they can form a series of objectives for your proposal;
- ***Consortium***: choose appropriate partners to meet objectives. SMEs may bring unique skills, but should not be involved just to 'tick a box';
- ***Work programme***: design tasks, milestones and deliverables to deliver objectives. Avoid all superfluous activity;
- ***Exploitation and dissemination***: maximise take up of the research & innovation by each stakeholder. Include more general communication to non-expert audiences;
- ***Writing style***: keep it simple, avoid jargon. Assume the reader is non-expert. Spell out how your project will meet impact needs in the abstract.

More about Climate Futures

Climate Futures is a multidisciplinary SME focused on improving research impact for consortia and small teams. We support strategy development, proposal writing, research, exploitation and dissemination deliverables and bridging to external stakeholder groups.

Our research expertise includes carbon and energy management, payments for ecosystem services, natural resources and community development. We are familiar with producing research outputs and policy briefings.

We combine our research background with practical experience of solving real world problems, including climate mitigation and adaptation, food security and land management. We are also communication specialists and have experience in journalism, photography and film-making.

We are currently partnered on projects with thirteen Universities and research Institutes, including The James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen University and the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research. Current funders include the European Union (FP7), Scottish Government and African Union Commission. We are also supporting H2020 research consortia for forthcoming calls, and researchers to promote their work.

We like to hear feedback. If you have any comments or suggestions, please let us know.

We are passionate about working with environmental research consortia to improve the impact of their work. Please get in touch to discuss your concept or proposal.

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